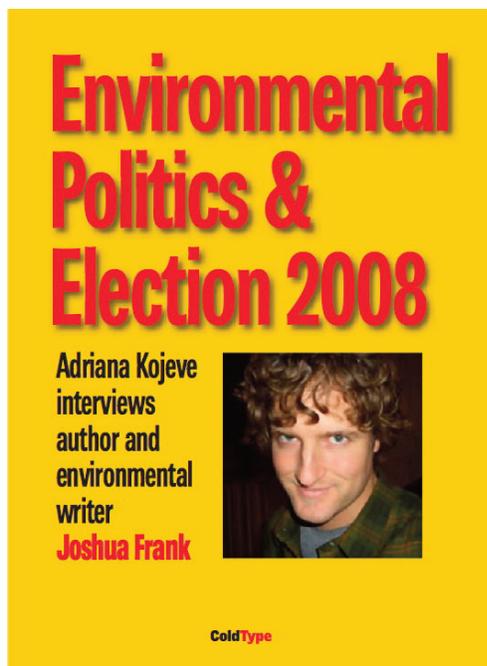


Environmental Politics & Election 2008

Adriana Kojeve
interviews
author and
environmental
writer
Joshua Frank



ColdType



Joshua Frank was born and raised in Montana. He is co-editor of Dissident Voice, and is author of **Left Out! How Liberals Helped Reelect George W. Bush**. He has also contributed essays for several books: **Dime's Worth of Difference: Beyond the Lesser of Two Evils** (CounterPunch/AK Press, 2004), **Independent Politics: The Green Party Strategy Debate** (Haymarket Books, 2006), **Beyond Borders** (Worth Publishers, 2006), as well as a lengthy interview with Ward Churchill in his forthcoming book, **Speaking Truth in the Teeth of Power**, to be published by AK Press. He can be reached at: joshua@dissidentvoice.org.

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ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS AND ELECTION 2008

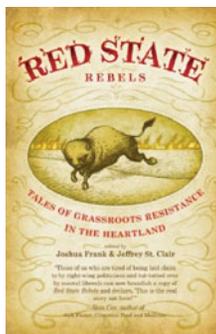
An interview with Joshua Frank

By Adriana Kojeve

Joshua Frank is an environmental writer and author who has recently co-edited a new book with Jeffrey St. Clair titled *Red State Rebels: Tales of Grassroots Resistance in the Heartland*, to be published in June by AK Press. He recently spoke with Adriana Kojeve about the elections and the current state of the environmental movement.

Adriana Kojeve: Joshua, the Barack Obama image is of a progressive candidate shaking up the two-party establishment. Now that environmental issues have moved to the forefront of public visibility, should environmentalists expect good news (especially in the wake of Bush)?

Joshua Frank: Well, first, I don't think environmentalists should ever expect anything good from any particular candidate. Expectations usually negate reality. You are right, though, Obama is definitely seen as an outsider who is challenging the two-party stranglehold in Washington. But what exactly is Obama challenging other than the Clinton reign within the Democratic Party? It is clearly not the structure of our so-called democratic process, as you won't



RED STATE REBELS

Jeffrey St. Clair &
Joshua Frank
Published by AK
Press
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see Obama calling on the Commission on Presidential Debates to allow Bob Barr or Ralph Nader into the TV foray next fall. We also aren't likely to see him address all the legal barriers that independent candidates face as they attempt to attain ballot lines across the country. And for what it's worth, Obama is not trying to get corporate cash out of the general elections. While he's gathering a lot of small donations online, Obama looks to be the new Mr. Wall Street. Just take a look at his major campaign contributors if you don't believe me. Employees of Goldman Sachs have given his campaign over \$500,000. JP Morgan Chase over \$350,000. Citigroup, \$330,000. So it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that Obama opposed a recent attempt to put a cap on credit card interest rates. Seems to me he's in their back pocket.

When it comes to energy policy, he's not much better. Employees of Exelon, the largest nuclear power plant operator in the country, and one of the largest employers in Obama's home state of Illinois, have given Obama's campaign nearly \$230,000. And lo-and-behold, Obama thinks we should consider nuclear energy. It's no matter that we haven't figured out how to safely transport the toxic waste produced by nuclear reactors. No matter that we don't know where to put it when we do. No matter that nuclear energy won't actually cut down on CO2 emissions, that great climate changing menace. As you go up the nuclear fuel chain, you have carbon dioxide emissions at every single step – from uranium mining, milling, enrichment, fuel fabrication, reactor construction to the transportation of the radioactive waste. Even more frightening perhaps is that two of Obama's largest campaign fundraisers, Frank Clark and John Rogers Jr., are both top Exelon officials. Even Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, has done consulting work for the company. So I don't think we're going to see Obama fairly assess the dangers of nuclear energy any time soon.

Kojeve: Wow, I didn't know that. Why do you think that's received relatively scant examination in debates and profiles?

Frank: For starters, I don't think the mainstream media believes it is their job to examine these candidates or their proposed policies. They rarely follow the money trails. They are much more concerned with their "gotcha" ratings than

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with substance. It's gotten so bad lately that I actually had a right-wing friend of mine tell me that I must be happy John McCain got the Republican nod, because, well, McCain is an environmentalist who opposes drilling in ANWAR and believes in global warming. Call it the Al Gore effect. But just because someone is sensible on a few issues doesn't make them green.

For example, I certainly don't think McCain or Obama are ever going to stop the pillage of our public lands that has all but ruined so many of our rivers and old-growth forests in the Northwest. They won't end the brutal practices of mountain top removal in Appalachia or cyanide heap leaching mining on Western Shoshone land in Nevada and elsewhere. They both support the lie of "clean coal."

Neither will end the horribly disastrous and poisonous war inflicted upon Iraq. I also don't believe for a second that any of the major candidates is going to get tough on corporate polluters or the Pentagon's toxic habits. Obama may poke fun at SUV drivers while campaigning in a state like Oregon, but you won't see the guy calling an end to subsidies that are handed out to oil companies. Yet, here we have Obama and McCain out-greening each other as they gallop along the campaign trail. It's all for show. Environmental issues are becoming pretty popular these days, so the candidates are jumping on the green-washed bandwagon.

How soon environmentalists forget what happened back in 1992 when Clinton and Gore stormed the White House. Many believed it was going to be a new day for the movement, overturning the

twelve long years of Republican wrath. But instead we got NAFTA, which undermined so many of our environmental statutes, and the Salvage Rider, which opened our ancient forests to ravenous clear-cutting. That's to name just two of the more egregious policies.

Kojeve: It's easy for environmental activists to look at all this and fall into despair. How should they approach elections?

Frank: Greens should approach the election as they approach the environmental issues they are working on locally, by playing defense rather than offense, and with aspirations rather than despair. As a minority we are better able to exert our energies against our enemies than attempting to hold our alleged allies accountable. Just look at the last eight years of Bush. Perhaps there has been no greater organizer against obscene environmental policies than the Bush administration.

During Clinton's reign, even though his national forest policies were just as bad and his administration effectively gutted the Endangered Species Act, mainstream greens raised few qualms. My fear is that many environmental activists will breathe a sigh of relief if a Democrat takes office next year, simply because said candidate pays lip service to their cause. This is exactly what's happened to the large green organizations like the Sierra Club and the NRDC. These aren't your environmental activists of 30 years ago, who were militant and uncompromising in their approach to shaping public policy. Instead, today we have run of the mill eco-lobbyists

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with six-figure salaries, bonus packages, Ivy League degrees and timeshares. They are buddy-buddy with the Democrats on the Hill, and, unable, or worse, unwilling, to hold their feet to the fire on a range of issues. Partisanship marginalizes our movement. I'd say this is the natural progression of social movements when they become reliant on foundation cash and political access to bring about change.

Kojeve: What are the limits of local grassroots pressure? One could argue that fundamental changes in environmental policy ultimately DO have to come from the government (and at a national level).

Frank: If you look at the most landmark federal environmental legislation, they were all born out of the grassroots. They never began at the top. President Nixon didn't one morning awaken having dreamed up the EPA, deciding he wanted to clean the filthy air of Los Angeles and monitor and protect species that were sliding toward extinction. He was forced to do so by grassroots movements that had permeated their ideas into the culture of mainstream America.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* helped launch this awareness. But she wasn't alone. Decades earlier, Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall and others worked tirelessly to protect America's wilderness areas – making sure that they remained in the public domain. But it took the deadly effects of DDT to organize communities and change societal behaviors, however marginal they may have been. Today many environmental issues are doing the same thing, and they cut

across political ideologies. We're talking about the health of our planet here, which affects every living thing.

I've spoken with organic farmers in Montana and North Dakota, who by no means are left-leaning environmentalists, but are committed to protecting their landbase for future generations and aren't afraid to take on Monsanto. You also don't have to be a radical to step up and fight a mining company from dumping poisonous debris in your local waterways. Just look at Ed Wiley's good fight against mountaintop removal in West Virginia.

I guess I'd say that the only real limit to grassroots pressure that I see is when we allow our concerns to be corralled into mainstream political debate. We have to work hard to keep pushing the envelope of discourse by exerting whatever pressure we can. We have to be critical at every turn.

For example, great environmental thinkers like Bill McKibben often critique our consumptive patterns, but you'll rarely hear them blame capitalism directly, which at its very core is based on the exploitation of labor and natural resources. That framing of the message effectively changes the debate from societal norms and financial structure to personal action and behavior. This is exactly what the whole guilt-laden carbon offset market is about: blame the individual not our economic system. I think ultimately this has a negative effect on the grassroots. We can't sideline our critiques and concerns simply to appease the powers that be.

Likewise we can't put all our hopes and aspirations into the hands of a few powerful people, for we're bound to get

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burned in the end. So why not instead continue to keep the torch aflame under the arses of the clowns in Washington and within our own state capitals? To me this seems to be a much more reasonable approach, by pulling them in our direction instead of playing the Russian roulette of lesser-evil politicking and letting them pull us into their firey pit.

Kojeve: But doesn't grassroots pressure, vibrant as it may be in certain local pockets, eventually need to translate into seizure of state power (which involves elections)? I'm not advocating the course the NRDC and Sierra Club have taken thus far, of course, but I do worry that some environmentalists (particularly of anarchist stripe) are too dismissive of the state's role altogether.

Frank: Well, I can't speak for all environmentalists, but I certainly do not dismiss the power or role of the state. I just think we should challenge it through varied avenues. I believe the only way to truly dismantle consolidated power is to give it back to the citizenry, not transfer it over to other figure heads, left-leaning or otherwise. I see this transition of power to be more localized, participatory, and less bureaucratic than the mess in Washington today.

I think from an environmental perspective, working at the local and state levels is an effective route to take in order to move in this direction, and can often reflect the needs of the people far better than the feds ever could, especially given the influence of big business in Washington. They aren't connected

to the plight of regular folks. In California, Montana, Oregon, Vermont, and elsewhere, people are pushing for far greater environmental statutes, but it's the feds that are halting their progress.

Would we really be that much better off if we had a state run oil company? What if the guy running it was Dick Cheney? Until power is taken out of the hands of the few, and given to the many, we'll continue on our current crash course. As Edward Abbey once wrote, "We cannot entrust the management of our lives to kings, priests, politicians, generals and county commissioners."

I'd add executives to that list as well. Like Abbey, I'd like to see our militarized government dismantled. Unfortunately a whole bloc of the left believes otherwise. I'll give you an example: President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. I visited the country a few years ago, just before his reelection. I believe he's doing an amazing job of reallocating money to the poor and less fortunate, who have been forgotten for far too long. He is attempting to make the country more localized, and less reliant on imported goods, such as food and water. These are all fantastic, necessary goals. But what's driving it? Where's this wealth coming from to implement all his social programs? Oil. A non-renewable natural resource. He's most certainly not transforming the country's economy into a sustainable one. While it might be giving him great leverage on the international playing field, threatening the US along the way, eventually that power is going to run its course, and the oil will stop fueling the revolution.

From an environmental perspective, this is not all that great of an alternative

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to the neoliberal model we are still employing today. At least not in the long run. In the end, it won't sustain Venezuela's economy, or the ecology of the region, as it is still fundamentally based on the exploitation of a non-renewable resource. And Chavez, if he's to sustain this transformation over the long haul, should be working hard to wean his country off the oil spigot. He inherited the mess, sure, but he must work fast to change the course of Venezuela's inevitable future. I guess this is partially why I'm skeptical of the top-down statism in general, be it capitalist or socialist.

Kojeve: OK, but in the short-term, in terms of enacting some decent policies (albeit reformist) policies, or at least overturning some of the terrible ones that you mentioned from the past decade or so, isn't it necessary to forge some sort of connection with actual lawmakers and policymakers? How else will it happen? Can you elaborate on the bridge between policy outcome and social movement?

Frank: That's a good question. I think the best, more effective policies don't actually come from policymakers, but from engaged citizens. If you look at policies that are positively effecting the environment, I think they come primarily from voters via ballot measures.

Look at Montana where good people there nixed a pro-mining initiative four years ago. Or look at L.A. where they voted in favor of pouring large amounts of money into water revitalization programs through Proposition O a couple

years back.

Legislatures are imprudent, not prescient. Environmentalists aren't the ones who should be reaching out to elected officials, they ought to be the ones who reach out to us. That's the difference I see at least, between how environmental groups give in and others remain effective. Not only in the interim, but in the long-term.

We shouldn't support a guy like Obama simply because he's marginally better than McCain on the environment. We should oppose him on the grounds that we don't agree with him. You only make a candidate better by placing demands on their candidacy. If you support their candidacies sans specific demands, then they win, and your cause loses.

This goes to the heart of what social movements ought to be about. They shouldn't submerge their quest for justice simply to elect the lesser of two evil candidates. A movement grounded on principle doesn't give in. An antiwar advocate doesn't support a candidate that supports one imperial war and opposes another. That would be foolish.

Let's compare anti-death penalty advocates to enviros for a minute. If you are against the death penalty ethically, you don't say, "well it's okay if only two in five death row inmates are executed. As long as a few aren't." No, instead you oppose all executions on the grounds that the state doesn't have a right to murder people. The same goes for environmentalists. You don't give up two acres of untouched forestland in order to save three acres, simply because that's the option some corporation and their elected allies have given to you. You stick to your guns and do your best to save

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them all. The more people that stand on principle, the more victories for the environment we're bound to see.

Kojeve: The United States seems to produce the bulk of the world's environmental problems, while other countries shoulder the majority of the burden. Will environmental reform ultimately come NOT from within the United States but from other countries fed up with this inequality?

Frank: Right now, China and Russia are consuming more and more oil every day. They are both fast catching up to us in this regard. If the US is to cut back on its consumption, I'm sure they'll pick up our slack. This isn't to say that we shouldn't bother to stop driving our Hummers and conserving energy. We should make an example that an industrialized nation can learn from its past mistakes. That's why the Kyoto Protocol, toothless as it may be, would be a step forward, if only to symbolically say we are going to begin changing our destructive ways.

However, for the US to confront its oil addiction head on, we're going to have to do a lot more than sign an international treaty or two. We are going to have to fundamentally alter the way we live and what and how we consume things. If we really would like to decrease the amount of oil we use, we have to address our reliance on imported goods. Think of all the oil used to manufacture and transport those products to the United States from Southeast Asia. Not only would it help the US economy if we began to produce the things we consume, including essentials like food – we'd ul-

timately be improving the quality of the environment.

If we stop purchasing Dole bananas grown in South America or even Apple computers built in China, we'll hopefully force these gigantic corporations to move in the right direction, like back to the states. This will not only create jobs, it will make us less vulnerable to massive ecological disasters, like food shortages and the like.

This will involve some sacrifice of course. We'll probably have to give up Wal-Mart and McDonald's, or meat in general for that matter – but people will benefit, as will the ecology of the planet. Currently it is still quite profitable to pollute and suck minerals and oil out of the ground. It's the capitalist way. Exxon-Mobile is the most profitable company in the history of the world for a reason.

If we can become less reliant on these resources to survive, these industries will be forced to change, or be abolished altogether. Which would be fine by me, and I imagine there are a few polar bears that might agree. There is much we can do as consumers and activists within this country that effects the environment and economics of the entire world. But if this change comes first from countries fed up with the environmental burden they are carrying for us, we ought to support them. I don't see the US as disconnected from the environmental responsibilities of other countries in any way.

Kojeve: What about countries that aren't Asian "tiger" economies?

Frank: I wouldn't call all the countries in

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Asia "tigers". Many that produce the crap Americans consume aren't all that strong economically. Simply because goods are made in South Korea or Peru doesn't exactly change the equation of who wins and who loses. The US and other first world countries are still the primary exploiters of the world's labor and natural capital. From the diamond mines of the African continent to the coffee fields of South America, profiteers care little about boundaries, unless of course those borders are telling them to turn around and go home.

Kojeve: Getting back to the presidential election, what do you think should radical environmental activists do if Obama is elected, amidst all the cheery romanticism that surrounds his campaign?

Frank: Luckily, most radical environmental activists will continue to fight against corporate plunder and greed no matter who wins next November. It's the do-good liberals and others that we have to be worried about; the ones that have been invigorated by the Bush years and think a Democratic messiah can save us. Only we can do that, by taking our lives into our own hands. We need to reconnect to the food we consume and the water we drink. We need to oppose the privatization of our natural resources and preserve what little wilderness we have left.

Romanticism can only sidetrack these efforts, so let's not get caught up in the election hoopla just because *The New York Times* and *Fox News* have nothing better to inundate us with. Get out there and join the fight. **CT**

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